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SUBJECT: JEWISH LIFE IN IVANOVO

¶1. (SBU) Summary: The Jewish community in Ivanovo is close-knit, active and shrinking, as increasing numbers of its young residents emigrate to Israel. While the Jewish community is generally accepted among the wider oblast community and relations with authorities are good, two Ivanovo residents are currently on trial for attacking Ivanovo's Rabbi last year. A Jewish community leader spoke of his efforts to work with one of the alleged attackers, during a February 12-13 visit to Ivanovo by Emboff. End summary.

¶2. (SBU) Ervin Kirstein, a doctor, leads the Jewish community in Ivanovo. Ivanovo, located 300 kilometers outside of Moscow, has been without a Rabbi since last summer when its Rabbi (a Canadian citizen) was attacked and he and his family moved to Stavropol. Kirstein said the move was unrelated to the attack and merely reflected the family's desire to live in a warmer climate in Russia. Kirstein told Emboff during a February 12-13 visit to Ivanovo that Jewish life there started "at the end of Soviet times," and was formally organized in 1993 with the establishment of the Society of Jewish Culture. In 1999, this organization joined the Federation of Jewish Communities, headed by Rabbi Lazar in Moscow. Prior to 1999, their organization survived by collecting money "here and there." Today the community is active and close-knit. They organize events around Jewish holidays and feasts in addition to their regular Shabbat services on Friday evenings. They have youth and women's clubs, a Torah school and offer Hebrew language courses for all ages. They participate in local community events, and present exhibits on Jewish history, Jewish culture and Israel. For 12 years, they have participated in Ivanovo's annual cultural festival.

¶3. (SBU) Kirstein estimated the actual size of Ivanovo's Jewish community at approximately five thousand with many more people having Jewish roots -- including the current Governor, Mikhail Men, he noted. Kirstein said young people in particular are interested in Jewish life but that they struggle to keep Jewish youth in Ivanovo. Most of these young people graduate from university then move to Israel, he said. Many people from within the region and outside are researching their family history and discovering their Jewish roots. Many of them also decide to move to Israel upon discovering their Jewish heritage.

¶4. (SBU) Ivanovo's Jewish community occupies a small building in the center of the city, which sits behind the city's former KGB headquarters. The city owns the building and has notified Kirstein of its desire to sell the property. Kirstein has scrambled to find money to purchase the building even reaching out via letter to Mayor Bloomberg of New York City. While he had heard the Mayor had been willing to give money for such causes, he had not received a response at the time of our meeting. Outside the entrance to their headquarters is a small monument to victims of the Holocaust.

15. (SBU) When asked about their relationship with local authorities, Kirstein told us that with the Mayor it is decent, "but not warm." While they are able to live a traditional Jewish life, Kirstein said authorities do not particularly like it when they wear yarmulkes, or "stand out," in any way. Kirstein said one young boy "is brave enough" to wear his yarmulke in school. He said their relationship with the Deputy Mayor improved after he made a trip to Israel.

16. (SBU) Kirstein said that law enforcement officials were responsive in the wake of the attack on Ivanovo's former Rabbi by three young people, one of whom fled the scene and was not apprehended. A trial is in progress against the other two suspects who were charged under Russia's ethnic hatred article of the criminal code. At the time of the attack, Kirstein told us, people in Ivanovo were furious. They called television and radio stations to vent their anger regarding the incident. Kirstein was given free time on television to discuss the attack. He said they expected a strong reaction from Governor Men but were disappointed when Deputy Governor Yuliya Zhukovskaya, whose portfolio includes civic and religious organizations, responded that there would be no statement until there was a court decision.

17. (SBU) Both suspects in the attack, Sergey Novikov and Ivan Novikov (not related), have stated their regret over the incident. Sergey Novikov claimed he was drunk at the time of the incident and emphasized he had no affiliation with any extremist groups. The other suspect, Ivan Novikov, is a student in the history department of the local university and has espoused extremist views both directly to Kirstein, who visited him in jail after his arrest, and in court. Despite

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this, Kirstein has opted to work with him by providing him with books about Judaism and inviting him to Jewish community events. Kirstein argued for his release from jail pending trial and said he does not believe he should be sentenced to prison if convicted. "Prison is not a school of life," Kirstein told us. Kirstein sat in on the first day of the trial and said he felt the judge was objective and that the authorities were not pressuring the court in any way.

18. (SBU) Kirstein said there are nationalist and fascists groups in the region, with some incidents of vandalism and anti-Semitic graffiti. In 2007, a Muslim cemetery in the region was desecrated. Some of these cases have been prosecuted while others have been ignored by law enforcement. He said the situation has improved somewhat under Governor Men, who was appointed in December 2005.  
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